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**Don't worry: Promoting resilience through the use of books in the classroom.**

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## **Abstract**

Although fears and worries are a normal part of childhood, anxiety can be quite distressing at times for children. In addition, there are many children whose fears and worries are excessive and who develop anxiety disorders which interfere with their lives. Using story books in the classroom has many benefits for the promotion of mental health and resilience for all children.

Most children worry or are afraid sometimes. In fact, fear is a normal emotion which has an adaptive function for survival. It has been shown that the content of normal fears in childhood show a developmental pattern from fear of loud noises, the dark and animals in toddlers, to fears in childhood of monsters, being hurt, failing in school and being criticised (Gullone, 2000). The number and intensity of fears generally declines with age and for most children these fears are relatively short-lived. However, there are times when some children's fears and worries are so intense that they need help in overcoming them.

Furthermore, there are some children who don't grow out of their intense fears and develop anxiety disorders. In fact, excessive anxiety is the most prevalent type of disorder experienced by children and young people (Albano, Chorpita & Barlow, 1996; Verhulst, van der Ende, Ferdinand, & Kasius, 1997). It is estimated that anxiety disorders can affect up to 18% of 6-17 year-olds (Costello & Angold, 1995; Kashani & Orvaschel, 1990). This means in an average school (Pre to Year 12) of 1000 students, there could be up to 100 children and young people with an anxiety disorder. This is of course, not including those who have sub-clinical symptoms or those at risk of developing a disorder. Thus there are more children who have an anxiety disorder than children with ADHD or any other disorder. The problem therefore is extremely widespread. Girls traditionally report more anxiety than boys but it is not known whether this means that they really suffer from more anxiety or are just more willing to report it. The gender balance is however, equal for children who receive treatment for an anxiety disorder.

## **Causes of anxiety**

Why some children develop excessive anxiety, to such an extent that it interferes with their life and the life of their family, is not known precisely. However, the debate is no longer "is the cause nature or nurture?" It is most likely a complex interaction between hereditary and environmental factors. Kagan and his colleagues have shown that children are born with different temperaments, one of which they label "behaviourally inhibited." These babies

are reluctant to leave their mothers, don't vigorously explore their world and are shy. They are children who are seen to be at risk of developing an anxiety disorder. In fact, the most extreme 5% of these children were found to be very similar at follow-up 15 years later.

The environment however, also plays a role. Some children experience negative life events such as death or divorce which can leave them vulnerable to being overanxious. Some children experience traumatic events, which can leave them seeing threat when it is not there. However, not all children who experience negative life events or even trauma become overanxious. Parenting practices can also inadvertently maintain excessive anxiety in children. Unintentional modelling by an anxious parent, over helping and over controlling are often parenting practices which help maintain a child's anxiety.

### **Consequences of anxiety**

It has been shown that excessive anxiety has negative effects in many areas of children's lives. Many children with an anxiety disorder have impaired social relationships. Quality peer relationships are usually indicative of satisfactory psychological adjustment. However, anxious children who fear negative evaluation often are too shy or timid or sometimes too bossy to interact with peers successfully. This often leads to exclusion and loneliness.

Excessive anxiety also impairs academic performance. Not only does too much anxiety lower achievement in a test situation but it can also interfere with the ability to concentrate to learn in the first place. Worrying about making mistakes reduces risk taking which means less learning and more learned helplessness. Excessive anxiety in children can be disruptive to family life when parents cannot leave the child with anyone else. It is also a source of potential conflict between parents about how to handle their child's fears and cause difficulties in family functioning especially if the child refuses to go to school. As well as social and academic difficulties children with excessive anxiety are distressed. It is not pleasant to feel scared, to not be able to do what you want to, and to worry constantly.

Therefore mental health promotion and prevention of anxiety are very important.

### **Using books in the classroom**

The reading of books can assist children with both transient normal fears and those who are excessively worried. This simple strategy, which teachers use as part of normal classroom practice, can be very powerful for children. Emotional learning needs to be embedded in the curriculum; social and emotional skills cannot be reserved for one lesson and not mentioned or practised again. However, teachers do not always have the time to implement manualised programs for each of the problems that children face in an already over crowded curriculum. However, stories can be used as part of the reading and viewing curriculum with an emotional content. They allow teachers the freedom to incorporate the topic of the story into any of their lessons.

## **Why stories?**

There are both narrative and scientific ways of knowing the world. Although in our society the scientific abstract way of understanding is often made out to be superior, a narrative way of conceptualising, explaining and understanding the world is no less valid.

Stories are the narrative framework. Any subject can be approached by stories. They are powerful yet familiar; integrating information and helping to create personal meaning. The role of narrative is important in children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Stories are an important technique for developing children's understanding of both their own feelings and others feelings.

Reading aloud with appropriate expression is an essential part of feelings education. Using intonation, volume, pauses, facial expression, posture and change of pace allows the reader to bring the words on the page to life. This helps children to feel the significance of the words and the interpretations that others make. Being able to understand the words inwardly and deeply is important for children as well as the understanding and personalisation that discussion promotes.

Bibliotherapy has connotations of a psychologist or counsellor using books for troubled children, while this can happen there is also limitless opportunities for teachers to use fiction books for promoting resilience and mental health in students and to help children be aware of and suggest solutions for personal problems. Incorporating books which deal with feelings and emotions is important for all children. Mental health promotion and prevention for all is as important as assisting children who have a particular problem with the right books.

## **The benefits**

Literature applied to a program using bibliotherapy helps to foster emotional and behavioural growth wherein selected readings portray true-to-life situations in relation to children's cognitive developmental levels (Jalongo, 1993; Riordan & Wilson, 1989). Through guided readings, children can discuss the implications of a story in a less threatening way than talking solely about themselves; students are able to consider their own thoughts and feelings about personal issues from the point of view of 'the other'. Stories help children learn that they are not alone, that others share similar problems to them (Christenbury, Beale, & Patch, 1996; Nickolai-Mays, 1987). Reading about others can help children develop compassion and insight into their own and others' problems. For example, the excellent series by Nelle Frances, *Ben and his Helmet*, allows "children to see their daily interaction through the eyes of a child with asperger's syndrome" (Jensen, 2006, p.21).

A common feature in children's literature is the use of animals as the non-specific, identifiable other that can keep a frightening idea from becoming terrifying (Livo, 1994). Animals in stories can create a distance from which children can view their own situations. However, a challenge for teachers is in choosing material that is age-appropriate and relevant to students' emotional and developmental needs. Christenbury et al. (1996) suggest that teachers need to read the material first as a way to know what the story is about and as a way to enter the child's world to become an empathetic listener.

Books can help teach children the words of the feelings they are experiencing, to look at more depths of expression and subtleties and complexities of feelings, to foster emotional literacy. Stories are also more respectful and less invasive of a child's emotional world. They are not directly confrontational. Stories site fears and worries in imagination with a resolution with different strategies. Stories also need to contain hope, about not giving up and encourage help seeking behaviour. They provide a place to examine feelings from a safe distance.

## **Research**

It has been shown that when children connect emotionally with a story it can also improve their attitude towards books and reading, especially those who struggle with reading (Triplett & Buchanan, 2005). Students who participated in instructional conversations about texts achieved at higher levels on standardized reading tests (Au & Jordon, 1981); and many research studies since then have found benefits in book discussions (Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001).

## **Books are particularly important for anxiety prevention**

Picture of author and books about here. \\edna\users\campbema\Personal stuff\Worrybusters book picture.JPG;

"Storytelling can help everyone, old and young, to deal with many different worries" (Ziegler, 1992, p.2). Children often confront their fears through fairy tales and stories. Bruno Bettelheim, the psychoanalyst, promoted the therapeutic value of fairy tales. He maintained that witches and wicked stepmothers are symbols for fears and phobias and reading enables children to confront their fears. Reading books provides a safe way to examine these fears without being shamed or embarrassed. Other anxious children and animals can be comforting to a child who is facing similar situations. To discover in books others anxious feelings is sometimes more powerful than having adults reassure children that others feel like that too. Other emotions such as anger and happiness seem to be more visible to children so reading and talking about worries and fears is especially important.

Fiction books can portray anxiety, in its many manifestations, in an understandable format to help teachers and parents know what children might be going through. Many studies have shown that reading books about anxieties and worries followed by discussion of feelings and reactions to the

stories have lessened children's fears (Ongoa, 1979; Cutforth, 1980; Pearson, 1987; Webster, 1961).

## Selecting stories

To prevent excessive anxiety or the development of anxiety disorders, children need to be able to

- Understand their own feelings
- Understand the feelings of others
- Express their emotions positively
- Ask for help when required

Thus the story needs to be about a real-life problem but in a non-direct manner. The book needs to have alternative solutions to increase all children's coping and to offer some resolution or hope to the problem so that children know to not to give up. There are hundreds of fiction books for preschoolers such as Waddell's (1999) *Can't You Sleep, Little Bear?* and Varney's (1995) *Jelly Legs*; books suitable for primary school students such as Browne's (1995) *Willy the Wimp* and Sunderland's (2000) *Willy and the Wobbly House*; for secondary school students Duff's (1999) *Duffy's Once Were Worriers* and Ruth Park's (1989) *Things in Corners*.

In addition there is the *Worrybusters* series of picture story books expressly written about all forms of anxiety. There are various themes in the books such as how parents inadvertently maintain anxiety and the family conflict an anxious child can cause. Another theme is how the anxious child is secretive because of embarrassment and so usually doesn't tell anyone about their fears. A further theme is how the physiological or bodily symptoms of excessive anxiety are so unpleasant that children avoid what is causing them. There is a mix of genders in the central characters in the books, four boys and three girls. Each book has a different helper for the anxious character; sometimes peers, an elder, a counsellor, a teacher. The books contain accurate anxiety symptoms based on research such as *Beulah the Anxious Bully* (Campbell, 2006), which is based on research that girl's disruptive behaviours are more closely connected to experiences of anxiety (Hudson, 2005).

Cover of Beulah book about here \\edna\users\campbema\worrybusters\Beulah the anxious bully cover.gif;
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As well as book discussions, additional activities such as drama, painting, poetry, music and problem solving further the teaching of self-confidence and resilience for children. Teachers can use books as the basis of a unit of work on worries and fears or incorporate books by content in units of work on such as dinosaurs, space, farm animals, school, wild animals, Australian animals and aborigines, to provide the emotional learning component.

Of course if teachers find that some children are extremely anxious they can refer them on to the school counsellor for assessment and intervention.

## **Conclusion**

In a world where it is now acknowledged that it takes a village to raise a child it is everybody's business to address issues of mental health and resilience. Using books and the stories they contain can provide an opportunity for children to learn coping skills in a safe and familiar environment.



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## Biography

Dr Marilyn Campbell is currently a senior lecturer at the Queensland University of Technology preparing psychologists and school counsellors in the Masters of Education program. Previous to this Marilyn supervised school counsellors and has worked in early childhood, primary and secondary schools as a teacher, teacher-librarian and school counsellor. Her main clinical and research interests are the prevention and intervention of anxiety disorders in young people.